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ABSTRACT

This paper compares and contrasts two articles in which Dickens constructs an adult identity through his childhood reading, "A Christmas Tree" (1850) and "Nurse's Stories" (1860), with one in which Dickens constructs the identity of a child in his work for children, "A Child's History of England" (1851-53). Infused into all of these works is Dickens' memory of his own childhood reading, and his reconstruction of childhood as a tension between innocent wonderment and disturbing fears. The darker side of the mind can only be held in check by the retention of childlike innocence. The family unit is, for Dickens, the facilitator of this preservation. But the family is also the source of the darker thoughts of the individual. Dickens' philosophy is a complex and ambiguous one. If the family can be the inspirer of wonder and the preserver of innocence, so it can also be the introducer of terror and fear to the child's mind. Dickens' childhood world is not a simple one. And he as father, teacher, and author continued to recreate his own childhood fantasies and fears in the minds of his readership. (Author/SWC)

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Dickens and Children's Literature

by
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This paper explores two articles, in which Dickens constructs an adult identity through his childhood reading, "A Christmas Tree" (1850) and "Nurse's Stories" (1860), and engages with the identity of the child in his work for children, *A Child's History of England* (1851-3). In these, he outlines what he considers appropriate reading and learning for children for the maintenance of "the imaginative faculty" of the mind (Letters, VI, 164). The publishers of children's literature of the day, whom he lists in a letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts in 1850, produce "charming" volumes. His own work for children is "romantic and attractive," "presenting the truth in an agreeable and winning form" (Letters, VII, 1-2). In this appeal to "fancy", Dickens' texts might be read as challenging the utilitarian notion of childhood education promoted in private and charity schools of the period, and satirized in *Hard Times* (see Craig, 20-24; Best, 169-90). Yet his understanding of childhood reveals a shift from a sense of its Romantic innocence to a more complex concern for the psychological ambiguities of the child's mind (Coveney, 122, 193). Both his fiction and his vision of the child's world are shot through with violence; they are worlds of enchantment and horror.

"A Christmas Tree" appeared in Household Words in December 1850. The tree Dickens describes is a symbol of his imaginative play and learning from earliest infancy to youthful adolescence. It stands upside down, as it were, growing downwards because the smallest child is closest to Heaven (and the angel at the top) and the earliest memories are, for Dickens, at once the foundation of growth and the highest value of human and spiritual innocence.

"A Christmas Tree" identifies his earliest reading through a series of texts located at different ages of development. He begins with alphabets, "Jack and the Beanstalk" (already introducing a strand of comic book violence), "Little Red Riding Hood" ("She was my first love."), Robin Hood, Valentine, the Yellow Dwarf, *Mother Bunch's Wonders* (a collection of nursery stories), and the *Arabian Nights*. This latter establishes a sense of wonderment at the world; the innocent child transforms the world around him, "Oh, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me" (Thomas, 131). Next are the more complex comic romances of the eighteenth-century, *Robinson Crusoe, The Adventures of Philip Quarll*, and *The History of Sandford and Merton*. He also recalls the Bible stories (the Nativity, Christ's miracles, and the Crucifixion). Finally, he describes Christmas itself: a release from more "adult" books of schooling: a moment, even for the adolescent, of refocussing on childhood and the family. The Latin classics are replaced by the family gathering to tell ghost stories which produce "an agreeable creeping up the back".

A decade later, in September 1860, Dickens reconstructed his view of childhood in a more ambiguous manner. A darker note is struck. In "Nurse's Stories", All the Year Round, Dickens is drawn back involuntarily to think upon the horrors of childhood reading; what had been "a fascination which I do not care to resist" (Thomas, 127), became a world which he was "forced to go back to at night, without at all wanting to go" (Thomas, 220). He recalls his guardian's tales of terror about which he dreamed, "I suspect we should find our nurse responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to, against our wills" (Thomas, 220-1). The opening list of reading (almost identical to that in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), ch. 4), comprises Defoe, Gil Blas, *Don Quixote, Tales of the Genii*, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, and Swift. More significantly, however, he recalls the oral stories of his nurse: the first, a violent tale ("an offshoot of the Blue Beard family"). This is the story of Captain Murderer, a man whose "warning name would seem to have awakened no general prejudice against him, for he was admitted into the best society and had immense wealth" (Thomas, 221). The captain lives to satisfy a blood-lust by marrying, murdering and eating his young brides. His courtship ritual involves ensuring that the bride can bake a good pie crust. Their wedding flowers he calls "Garnish for house-lamb". Once married, he produces a golden rolling pin and silver pie dish, has the wife bake an immense pie crust, and tells her that the meat filling is in the mirror. The "bride looked up at the glass, just in time to see the Captain cutting her head off; and he chopped her in pieces, and peppered her, and salted her, and put her in the pie, and sent it to the bakers, and ate it all, and picked the bones" (Thomas, 222). This grisly process

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is repeated when he marries one of two sisters -- a fair one who loves him and a dark one who hates him. The dark girl watches the fate of her sister, then chooses to marry the captain plotting revenge. She is chopped up and eaten, too, but has taken a deadly poison which makes the captain swell, turn blue, come out in spots, scream, and finally explode.

Dickens remarks how this story haunted him and, though he pleaded with his nurse not to, she would repeatedly tell it. Dickens' retelling of the story, however, serves as an ironic vehicle for passing it on to his own young readers. The "fascination" of the macabre which he identifies as part of the character of his nurse, is also present in himself. Dickens assumed the role of the nurse. The nurse is called Mercy, "though she had none on me", and this is the name of the suffering and battered wife in Martin Chuzzlewit (Dickens' revenge perhaps!). The two articles, then, form a balanced reassessment of the influence of juvenile reading and story listening on the child and adult imagination. Dickens had divided his memories, and it is this split, this fault line, between the imaginary world of wonder and of horror, which characterize his writing for children.

A Child's History of England was published in Household Words between 25 January 1851 and 10 December 1853. The three-volume edition was published in 1851, 1853, and 1854 by Bradbury and Evans. Dickens dedicated it to the education of his own children. Hudson comments that it differed markedly from the "mild gentility" of the two popular children's histories of the day, Mrs. Markham's *History of England* and Lady Callcott's *Little Arthur's History of England*. As Dickens said in a letter to Marcus Stone, "I believe it to be true, though it may be sometimes not as genteel as History has a habit of being" (19 dec. 1853; Letters, VII, 229). Dickens used few sources -- the main was Thomas Keightley's *History of England* (1839) -- revealing how he sought to produce an imaginative rather than a prosaic rendering. Dickens turns history into carnival in order to subvert the Liberal sense of gradual civilization, presented in such contemporary works as Macauley's *History of England* (the first part appeared in 1849). The pageant of kings becomes a role call of violence and aristocratic ungentlemanliness -- not at all bourgeois or genteel.

Dickens' *A Child's History*, then, is at once an indictment of power abuse (much against children, and most within the family unit) and an intervention by a paternalistic author in the education of children. Violence signifies the breakdown of benevolent and morally guided familial relationships within the text (as in other of Dickens' novels), but it also occurs within the darker side of the imagination. Like the articles on children's reading, Dickens' fairy tale world hovers between a sense of wonderment and innocence and an acknowledgment of the grotesque and the violent as present in the child's mind. Violence is thus committed against children in actuality within the text, and presented by the author as a necessary part of the imaginative reading of children. Whilst he might accuse his nurse of having disturbed his childhood sleep with her tales of terror, nevertheless, this very terror plays a significant part in his own emotional development and is necessarily a part of his own fiction. He takes great delight in mimicking the merciless nurse Mercy himself. Since the child's imagination is beset by both innocent wonder and grotesque terror, the title of *A Child's History of England* can also be read ambiguously as a history for a child and a history by a child. Dickens' polemical, personal, seemingly uncomplicated, unscholarly, verging on the naive, deliberately willful account, imitates in its imaginative structures, style and tone, the reconstruction of childhood established in "A Christmas Tree" and "Nurse's Stories.".

Dickens' *History* is not so much about history as about family. Family relationships and cruel violence are frequently brought together in the text. The orphan is central here, as all kings are, by their very accession to the throne, paternal orphans. Many children are murdered in the book to make way for royal usurpers. The nurturing of violence within the family, through a series of political suppressions and silencings, does little to help children (who do grow up to succeed their fathers) avoid similar methods of rule.

Violence breeds violence and is central in Dickens' History. One reign after another is gained and held through brutality. In the period of Henry II, for instance, one Irish king has the heads of 300 prisoners cut off and then "coming to one which was the head of a man whom he had much disliked, grasped it by the hair and ears, and tore off the nose and lips with his teeth" (ch. 12). A mass suicide of Jews at York, under the oppressive rule of Richard I, leaves behind "heaps of greasy cinders, with here and there something like part of the blackened trunk of a burnt tree, but which had lately been a human creature..." (ch. 13). In Edward I's reign, Sir John Douglas "roasted the dead bodies of the slaughtered garrison in a great fire made of every movable within it; which dreadful cookery his men called the Douglas larder" (ch. 16) (an echo of Captain Murderer). In royal

families, individuals fare little better: Henry I blinds his brother, Robert, "done by putting a red-hot metal basin on his eyes" (ch. 10); Edward, one of the six boy-kings, dies on his stepmother's orders, stabbed in the back and dragged behind his frightened horse, it "dragging his smooth young face through ruts, and stones, and briars..." (ch. 4); King John murders his young nephew (ch. 14); Richard III, his young nephews (ch. 25); Henry VIII beheads his wives (chs. 27-8).

For Dickens, the family unit was the basis for social cohesion in a fragmenting world. The individual must operate within a moral structure learned through the family; society, deprived of the old master-servant order, relied upon the family order. Thus, Dickens finds social and personal threat united in interfamily violence; internecine husband-wife relationships (like Captain Murderer's), fratricide, and infanticide, all feature in *A Child's History*. These can be read as reflecting a discourse of family violence. The aberrant family member lacks responsibility towards the others in the family (as Dickens felt his father had failed him and his need for education during his employment in a Covent Garden factory). Such characters abound in Dickens' novels: bad mothers or mother-figures, such as Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe, in *Great Expectations* (1860-1), who, careless of the child, gives him bread which can harm rather than nourish: "...with her left hand she jammed the loaf hard and fast against her bib--where it sometimes got a pin into it, and sometimes a needle, which we afterwards got into our mouths" (ch. 2). Bad fathers, step-fathers, and guardians, like Mr. Murdstone or Fagin or Mr. Dombey; bad brothers, like Louisa Gradgrind's brother, Tom; husbands or partners, like Sikes or Bounderby; wives like Mrs. Blackpool; and, indeed, nurses -- all of these represent deviant and unnatural family members. Indeed, at one point in *A Child's History*, Dickens takes this further to note that the lack of "homes", the domain of the family, amongst the English at a time of social unrest, was the greatest threat to the common people: ashes of burnt towns and dreary wastes, were all that the traveller, fearful of the robbers who prowled about at all hours, would see in a long day's journey; and from sunrise until night, he would not come upon a home" (ch. 11). This sounds a note of warning to the State; government paternalism is to be preserved and cherished. The loss of this, whether through authoritarian and aristocratic abuse of power or the disorder of a people's uprising (both of which are seen in Dickens' historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) -- in which Carton sacrifices himself for the preservation of Lucieís family and the return of the husband and father, Darnay, and so redeems society), is one of Dickens' most persistent themes.

It is through the metamorphosis of history into fairy tale that Dickens intends to make the violence of the text acceptable. As in "Captain Murderer", such sequences of violence have an imaginative impact which is creative and productive rather than destructive and dangerous. Redemption is often found in sacrifice of the innocent. Dickensí fascination with the grotesque and macabre must be seen in this light; imbued with the innocent vision of the child, it becomes an acceptable if disturbing part of the child's mind. Within the text, those who lose the innocence of the child are corrupt and evil in his moral scheme, and commit terrible acts of brutality; they serve themselves rather than the people. Alfred the Great is the model king, a teacher. Like him, the reader must ëresolve, when we see any of our fellow creatures left in ignorance, that we will do our best, while life is in us, to have them taught...í (ch. 3). There is a link here to the child-victim, Jo, the crossing sweeper in Bleak House (1853-4), whose kind are "dying thus around us every day" (ch. 47), and who lives "in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops...To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language -- to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb!" (ch. 16).

Memory serves to promote goodness of heart and, in opposition to the neglectful rulers, will aid the individual to teach the ignorant child, like Jo. Infused into *A Child's History* is not only the memory of the history of England but also Dickens' memory of his own childhood reading, and his reconstruction of childhood as in a tension between innocent wonderment and disturbing fears. The darker side of the mind, as of the past, can only be held in check by the retention of childlike innocence. The family unit is, for Dickens, the facilitator of this preservation. As he notes of Alfred the Great, "he had -- as most men who grow up to be great and good are generally found to have -- an excellent mother" (ch. 3). But the family is also the source of the darker thoughts of the individual. Dickens' philosophy is a complex and ambiguous one. If the family can be Christmas and holiday (as in "A Christmas Tree"), the inspirer of wonder and the preserver of innocence; so it can also be the introducer of terror and fear to the child mind, the ënurseí of violent, annihilating,

and alienating images. Dickens' childhood world is not a simple one. And he as father, teacher, author, continued to recreate his own childhood fantasies and fears in the minds of his readership.

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